



Papua New Guinea: Women Human Rights Defenders In Action

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"I will go back to (my home province) and I will tell the mothers to rise up." - Police woman in Port Moresby working with women in the community to prevent violence against women.

Research conducted in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s found that on average two thirds of women had been hit by their partner. In two Highlands provinces included in the study almost one hundred percent of women reported that they had been hit by their partners. Anecdotal evidence suggests that rates of intimate partner violence are unlikely to have decreased in the intervening decades. However, lack of data means that it is impossible to comment confidently one way or the other, particularly with respect to any particular region or group within society.

"Prior to colonisation men dominated everything. Men decided when to have sex. This is a big problem in the context of HIV/AIDS. Culturally women cannot negotiate." - HIV/AIDS peer educator, Port Moresby.

Research conducted by the Papua New Guinea Medical Research Institute in the early 1990s found that 55 per cent of women interviewed had been forced into sex against their will, mostly by men known to them. In a report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Government of Papua New Guinea stated that "young women all over the country are at high risk of rape, gang rape and other forms of violent sexual assault." In the same report, preliminary research was referred to which found that 30 per cent of girls and women in one urban settlement had been victims of sexual violence.

Gender-based violence not only has a direct impact on the physical and psychological well being of women across the country, it also inhibits the ability of women to move freely in the community and

therefore impacts on their ability to participate on an equal basis in all aspects of public life. Gender-based violence impedes women's access to already limited healthcare, education and employment opportunities. At a time when Papua New Guinea is confronting a HIV/AIDS epidemic, gender-based violence also places women at increased risk of infection and limits the effectiveness of awareness raising campaigns which assume that women have control over when and how they have sexual intercourse.

"Domestic violence is everywhere. We see all types of women (in the refuge)—expats, wives of politicians, women with well paid jobs – it is not just the women from the village or the settlements." - Counsellor at a Port Moresby women's refuge.

Although gender-based violence is pervasive in Papua New Guinea, it would be wrong, and indeed misleading, to present the women of Papua New Guinea as a collection of passive, silent victims. Many women in Papua New Guinea are also active and vocal agents of change, engaged in a struggle to build safer homes and communities. Although they are grossly under-represented in national and provincial parliaments, in local government, in village courts, in the police force and judiciary, they continue to work towards the prevention of gender-based violence and effective redress for victims. When Amnesty International visited three provinces of Papua New Guinea the organisation spoke to many such women. Following is a brief snapshot of shot of the work being undertaken by some of them.

Esther Alfred: Leading By Example

When Esther Alfred was young her community was displaced from their lands near Kudjip during a period of tribal fighting. She grew up on the land of

a neighbouring community and when she was old enough, she was married into that community. Her husband's family had been very good to her people

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and it was expected that she would marry one of their sons essentially as a sign of gratitude. Was she forced to marry?

"Forced" is the wrong word according to Esther, "it



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Esther Alfred with her husband and two sons.

was just expected, just understood".

Fortunately for Esther the match has been a happy one. Not only has she returned with her husband and two sons to live in Kudjip in her own village amongst her own people, but with the support of her husband, she has also become a trained counsellor and active human rights defender. She knows first hand about the difficulties faced by women in her area and her aim is to be a resource and example to them.

One of the ways that Esther does this is simply by demonstrating to the community what it is possible for women to achieve if given the opportunity. Esther works as a pre-school teacher, counsellor and trainer at the **Country Women's Association Early Childhood Education Resource Centre** in Mt Hagen.

Every day Esther travels to the Centre which is some two hours from Kudjip by local transport. It is possible for Esther to undertake this work because her husband cares for their children and tends the family's garden. Such a reversal of traditional roles requires courage on both the part of Esther and her husband, and means that they are sometimes mocked by other members of the village. Nonetheless, the type of equal partnership Esther enjoys with her husband, and the benefits it has

brought to the family in terms of cash income and access to opportunities, have not gone unnoticed as a model for others.

Through her work at the Early Childhood Education Resource Centre and through her membership of the Country Women's Association, Esther has had opportunities to receive both trauma counselling training, sponsored by UNICEF, and human rights training, sponsored by the United Nations Development Program. Esther considers these opportunities to be a real privilege; a privilege which comes with obligations. Being from a rural village without electricity, Esther regards it as her responsibility to pass on what she has learnt in her interactions and relationships with her community. She has integrated awareness-raising about the Convention on the Rights of a Child into the curriculum at the Centre where she works. She is aware of the signs of child abuse and neglect and regards it as her responsibility, as a member of the community, to be alert to these. She runs a monthly radio program where she talks about children's rights. She provides volunteer trauma counselling in both Mt Hagen General Hospital and the Kudjip Nazarene Hospital for victims of child sexual abuse and other forms of gender-based violence. After receiving training Esther, of her own initiative, approached these hospitals so that they would know that she was a resource available to them in the community. In this context, she has taken up several cases where she has acted as liaison between victims of sexual violence and their families, the hospital and the police. She attempts to remind families to place concern for the victim at the centre of their decision making. In late 2005, Esther had just begun to document some of these cases and to provide reports to organisations such as the Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee and international organisations such as UNICEF. Unfortunately, her computer was stolen during a burglary at the Centre, which has made this reporting somewhat more difficult.

Esther is very proud of her cultural heritage and when Amnesty International visited she was in the process of collecting feathers and other materials for a traditional costume to be worn in an upcoming celebration. However, she will not abide restrictions on women's human rights being justified on the basis of culture, whether it be 'traditional', 'introduced' or otherwise. Esther makes her protest in quiet way. When police were stopping women on a road near her house for wearing long trousers,

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rather than skirts, and cutting the women's trousers in order to shame them, Esther continued to wear her trousers and encouraged other women to do the

same. The police, seeing her resolve, did not challenge her.

Sister Rose Bernard: Respecting the Inherent Dignity in Every Human Being

Sister Rose Bernard, a nun from the United States of America, has lived and worked in Papua New Guinea for 41 years. In 1985 she read in a magazine about the HIV/AIDS virus in Africa and became concerned that if the virus ever reached PNG it would spread like wild fire. She started to include information about the virus in her church retreats, dedicating one night of each retreat to HIV/AIDS awareness. It took a further five years before HIV/AIDS reached her parish in the Highlands, and in the interim some of her parishioners started to think Sister Rose might have gone a little crazy, that perhaps the virus she kept talking about didn't really exist. Unfortunately, the evidence soon proved otherwise. In 2006, PNG is in the middle of an HIV/AIDS epidemic and the province where Sister Rose works, the Western Highlands, has one of the highest infection rates in the country.

Sister Rose now operates the **Sisters of Notre Dame Salome Care Centre** in Banz which is a care centre for people living with HIV/AIDS.

When a person in her region discovers they are HIV/AIDS positive, Sister Rose knows that they are vulnerable not only to discrimination and alienation but also to more direct forms of violence at the hands of fearful and superstitious communities. Sister Rose shared with Amnesty International accounts of people living with HIV/AIDS who were neglected and left alone to starve by their families, of people living with HIV/AIDS who were forced to leave their villages, and of people with HIV/AIDS dying in suspicious circumstances, such as house fires.

In this environment, Sister Rose discreetly calls upon those who have just been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS to let them know that they are not alone, that they need not be without hope, and to offer her assistance in speaking to their families, churches and villages. Her reputation has grown, and now people often come to her rather than the other way around. She is also assisted by eight counsellors who, without invading anyone's privacy, help to quietly identify people in the community living with HIV/AIDS and bring them to the Care Centre.

The most remarkable thing about Sister Rose is that even after years of dealing with poverty, deprivation and violence in the community – her reserves of compassion are far from exhausted. If human rights are, in essence, about recognising and respecting the inherent dignity in every human being, then Sister Rose is indeed a model human rights defender. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the scope of the development challenges facing PNG, including the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. However, Sister Rose is able to persevere and have an impact because she believes that every person matters. She invests time in changing the attitudes of individuals, families, congregations and villages one by one. In this respect, Sister Rose has had many successes, both because she is equipped with the facts about HIV/AIDS and also because she provides a compelling example of care and compassion in action. When Sister Rose relayed the story of a woman with HIV/AIDS who died in her sleep on the



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Sister Rose with Josephine who works with her at the Salome Care Centre

final night of a one week retreat at the Care Centre, a tear appeared in her eye as she recounted how happy the woman was during the retreat to have found a group of friends who understood and supported her. For Sister Rose, there is never "just another death".

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For that reason, Sister Rose believes that HIV/AIDS awareness programs should not be limited to using scare tactics to halt the spread of the disease. She is concerned about educational plays which end with a person discovering they are HIV/AIDS positive and dropping dead, virtually on the spot. According to Sister Rose, communities must also be taught to embrace and care for those living with HIV/AIDS, and people who have the virus should not be forced to immediately surrender all hope and give up on life.

The Salome Care Centre runs a one week residential program for people living with HIV/AIDS. During the program participants learn about health and nutrition, share stories, build friendships, experience a bit of normalcy and even just have some fun.

Everyone has to weigh in at the beginning of the course and weigh out at the end, and according to Sister Rose participants always manage to gain weight. The course was originally just for women, but now also caters for couples. People who participate in the course are encouraged to be ambassadors and some participate in Sister Rose's radio program by sharing their own experiences with listeners.

Following from Sister Rose's example, four other places have built care centres, three for people living with HIV/AIDS and one for orphans of HIV/AIDS. As further evidence of her impact, even the police in Banz have approached Sister Rose to ask how they can help raising awareness about the virus.

The Individual and Community Rights Advocacy Forum (ICRAF): Empowering Women Through the Law

ICRAF is a Port Moresby-based human rights NGO with a long history of working within the justice system to realise the promise of human rights contained in Papua New Guinea's Constitution. The organisation has always recognised that women's rights are human rights and this is best reflected in a landmark National Court case which ICRAF commenced in the 1990s.

In 1996, the staff at ICRAF read in a national newspaper that a young woman in the Western Highlands was going to be given to another tribe as part of a compensation payment which also included pigs and money. The newspaper further reported that the young woman, Miriam Willingal, did not want to marry into the other tribe because she wanted to continue her education and find employment. Using a section of the Constitution that allows anyone who has an interest in the protection and enforcement of Constitutional rights to apply to the National Court for an order or declaration, ICRAF commenced legal proceedings. ICRAF sought a declaration from the National Court that the compensation agreement, if enforced, would violate a number of constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms.

The leaders of the relevant tribes attended the Court and at the request of the presiding judge, ICRAF interviewed all those with an interest in the case and filed affidavit evidence. The evidence presented revealed that the case was far from simple. The compensation agreement was a product of complex

inter-tribal relationships of mutual obligation and was designed to maintain balance between tribes across several generations. There was debate about whether Miriam Willingal, who was the subject of the case, was being forced to immediately marry a particular man from the other tribe; or whether the compensation agreement meant that when she came to marry she would be limited to choosing someone from the other tribe; or whether the compensation agreement did not relate directly to her at all but simply formally acknowledged that until a woman from her tribe married someone from the other tribe, whenever and whoever that might be, her tribe would continue to carry a sort of debt to other tribe.

Ultimately the Court found that the custom of asking or obliging women from one tribe to marry into another tribe in order to satisfy a compensation agreement violated the rights of those women, even if the request was an open or general one which did not relate to any particular person. The Court found that such a custom would inevitably create an unfair obligation on women who were from the tribe that was subject to the request, and would result in pressure being placed upon those women to marry a man from the other tribe upon reaching marriageable age. The Court found that it would not be in the public interest to recognize or allow a custom to be enforced which would subject Miriam or any woman from the area to such pressure nor to force any woman to live under threat and in fear in her young and single life. The Court also found that,

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under any circumstances, it was repugnant to the principles of humanity for men or women to be dealt with as part of a compensation payment.

As a result, the Court ordered that the tribes of the area abandon the custom of requesting young women as part of compensation payments. The Court also ordered that members of both tribes involved in the case were forbidden from enforcing such a custom against Miriam Willingal or any woman whether by request, threat, force or otherwise.

Although the Constitution of Papua New Guinea guarantees equality for women and although the Constitution takes precedence over customary practice, but for the initiative and intervention of ICRAF, the protection afforded by the Constitution would have been of little value to Miriam Willingal.

Like many NGOs dependent on donor funding and the tireless, often voluntary, work of individuals, ICRAF has had its ups and downs and experienced periods of relative inactivity. Nonetheless, today ICRAF remains a key contributor to the struggle to educate the community, and particularly women, about their human rights and ICRAF continues to assist women to exercise those rights through the court system.

ICRAF operates a community legal centre where Dianne Aikung, a lawyer employed by the organisation provides legal advice and representation to women on matters relating to family law and to the general public on matters relating to human rights violations and discrimination. ICRAF also operates as a counselling service and women's refuge, with emergency accommodation available at a secret, secure location. Lady Hilan Los, the Executive Director, who is also a trained and experienced counsellor, and Geuwa Kekaha, provide professional counselling

to women who drop into the office seeking assistance or who are staying at the refuge.

As well as this case work, ICRAF also undertakes awareness-raising and training projects on human rights. For example: ICRAF has run human rights awareness programs in the Waigani police barracks and at the Gordon police training centre; one afternoon a week, final year medical students attend the ICRAF office for human rights awareness training; and ICRAF has conducted several human rights awareness programs in the settlements of Port Moresby, bringing together community police and welfare officers to provide information on the variety of services available to the community when their rights have been violated.

In mid 2005, ICRAF conducted a week long paralegal training program for women and men, primarily counsellors, who work with victims of gender-based

violence. There were approximately twenty participants in the program from almost all the provinces of Papua New Guinea. The purpose of the paralegal training course was to ensure that organisations which have contact with women affected by violence are able to provide them with accurate information about their legal rights and where possible, take practical steps to facilitate their access to justice. Under section 29 of the District Courts Act,

women may be represented in court by a counsellor or support worker. As a result, course participants were taught court etiquette and given an opportunity to practise their advocacy skills so as to increase their confidence in the courtroom.

Unfortunately, ICRAF has just one lawyer, two trained counsellors, an office manager and an office assistant, so, while the demand for their services is great (as Amnesty International observed in ICRAF's waiting room), there is a real limit to the number of



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Dianne Aikung advising a client at ICRAF's office in Port Moresby

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cases and other activities the organisation can take on.

And there are many, many more women taking a stand.....

Tessi Soi is the head of the Social Work Department at the Port Moresby General Hospital. In the course of her work at the hospital she saw the alienation, discrimination and neglect that mothers and children living with HIV/AIDS were suffering and so she set up an NGO, known as **FRIENDS Foundation**, to assist. With an emphasis on peer education, the organisation undertakes general awareness-raising in the community directed at combating the stigma and abuse that people living with HIV/AIDS regularly face. FRIENDS Foundation also provides a support network to people living with HIV/AIDS. For example, Tessi has organised a support group for mothers and their children who are HIV/AIDS positive so that they can draw strength from each other and know that are not alone. Both the organisation and Tessi, from her own pocket, provide money where they can for all manner of incidental HIV/AIDS-related expenses which are not catered for by the government. For example, FRIENDS foundation helps provides bus fares to allow mothers living with HIV/AIDS to cover the cost of travelling to and from the Port Moresby General Hospital, particularly in the critical 18 months following the birth of their child. FRIENDS FOUNDATION has also paid for and conducted dignified burials for the dozens of child victims of HIV/AIDS whose bodies lie unclaimed in the hospital's morgue.



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Tessi Soi in her Office at Port Moresby General Hospital



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Onnie Teao at Haus Ruth

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As a result of funding constraints, nineteen of the shelter's rooms are rented out to single working women and five are kept available for emergency drop-in or emergency referral cases. The shelter also used to have a toll free number that women and children could call from anywhere in the country for crisis counselling, but it proved too popular and had to be closed because of the expense involved.



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Anne Aina and Margaret Yom in front of their office in Morata Four

records of the cases they deal with and provide information to Sgt Dikin. If a woman comes to the safe house regularly then they use the records to press for charges to be laid, and to explain to the woman's partner that their records show that he has already had many chances to change but has not taken them. The women have saved money as a group so that they have a mobile phone to facilitate their communication with the police. Building on their success, they have also commenced a regular neighbourhood cleanup and beautification program, run awareness programs for the community on issues such as HIV/AIDS and run programs for members of the group so that they can learn practical skills, like sewing, to ensure that they are financially independent. The group now has an office at Margaret's house where they meet regularly, and members of the group have blue blouses which they wear to indicate that they are a team, working together with the community police.

Margaret Yom and Anne Aina are both founders of the **Morata Four City Community Group**. Both women live in Morata settlement of Port Moresby, a poor area with a relatively dangerous reputation. Their group was founded when Anne, herself a victim of persistent domestic violence, teamed up with **Sgt Patrina Dikin** of the Waigani Community Policing Unit, to work out a way that women in Morata Four could combine forces to provide protection to each other. They formed a women's group and designated Anne's house as a safe house where women of the community could go and stay if they were in fear of violence. Now, when a woman comes to the safe house, a bell is rung so that the other women in the group know that their assistance is needed. They pool their limited resources to ensure that the food and any of the woman's other needs are provided for. The women keep



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Maggie Turwai with information brochures for women on gender-based violence and the law.

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Maggie Turwai works for **Catholic Family Life Services** in Mt Hagen, Western Highlands and coordinates counselling training for the 23 parishes in her province. The focus of most of the counselling is on "marriage enrichment, preparation for marriage and natural family planning".

However, Catholic Family Life Services, which is a national organisation, has also developed a training manual on rape trauma counselling and Maggie has trained 25 women throughout her province to act as part of a network of rape counsellors. After she was sent to the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre to participate in their regional training course, Maggie returned and organised a series of workshops to pass on what she had learned about women's human rights to other men and women in the church's network. Maggie knows that women are isolated and don't have access to information, so she tries to ensure that she gets her hands on every available pamphlet or booklet about women's rights to distribute and she re-packages any training she receives to pass on to others. In addition training counsellors, Maggie also provides drop-in counselling herself. Maggie told Amnesty International that most of the time in the Western Highlands victims of gender-based violence are overlooked and receive no help. She lamented that family leaders, community leaders and village court officials are fixated on compensation and "don't think about what a woman is going through."

Lucy Berak, Christopher Maingu and Elizabeth Cox work with **HELP Resources** in Wewak, East Sepik. HELP Resources adopts the approach that community and women's empowerment is dependent on access to information. For HELP Resources, access to information means access to information presented in a manner and language that is both immediately relevant and comprehensible to the community. Amongst many other things, the organisation:

- maintains a community library with resources relating to topics like human rights and gender and development;
- has prepared a series of radio shows on human rights related topics;
- has conducted human rights training, which includes information on gender and human rights, gender and violence and gender and HIV/AIDS, for community police, teachers, private enterprise and the general community; and
- has conducted "train-the-trainer" human rights sessions for people from across the country and, where possible, attempts to provide ongoing support and resources to new "trainers".



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Carol, Lucy and Chris in HELP Resources library, Wewak

More recently HELP Resources has conducted research on human rights issues. Thus far they have completed a report on child sexual exploitation in Papua New Guinea, a report on the social impact of the local South Seas Tuna Factory, including a study of the work conditions of the mostly female employees, and a report on the social impact of the 2003 vanilla boom in East Sepik which saw an influx of cash and people to the province.

The **East Sepik Council of Women** (ESCOW) is one of the Provincial Councils under the National Council of Women. As in other provinces, ESCOW is made up of a number of District Councils of Women which in turn are

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made up of area associations. ESCOW is active on a number of fronts. ESCOW operates as a base for the College of Distance Education through which year 11 and 12 students, mostly girls, are able to access on going education. ESCOW operates a micro-financing bank where women can both save their money and access small low-interest loans for the purpose of commencing small scale businesses. Before women can qualify for a loan, they must first demonstrate their savings capacity and must also participate in small business training. ESCOW has also run a HIV/AIDS peer education training courses for women, which includes education on gender and women's rights. In addition to women leaders from the ESCOW network, ESCOW also invited young women and women in the sex industry to participate in the training.

In relation to violence against women in particular, ESCOW operates a crisis centre which is co-located with the community police resource centre. Through the crisis centre, women can access trauma counselling and longer term assistance such as para-legal advice and marriage counselling. ESCOW also allows women to stay within their grounds and to conduct small scale trading from their premises, mostly selling betel nut.



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Florence Paninga at home with her mother in East Sepik

opened up her own home as a safe house for women in her region. She organises workshops for local women on issues ranging from HIV/AIDS awareness to making banana chips for sale at the markets. Women know they can come to her for advice and counselling or, if the police are ignoring a particular case in the area, that she will use her networks to take the matter higher.

Sarah Garap is the founder-director of the organisation MERI I KIRAP SAPOTIM (MIKS), which in pidgin means 'Women are awakening, support them', or, 'Women awaken supported'. MIKS' vision is to see many more women in decision making positions and in all areas of employment, including in the informal sector. The organisation aims to achieve this by educating women about their rights and drawing attention to the valuable and important role women can and do play in family and community development. The organisation was formed in the aftermath of the 2002 national elections which were marred by violence in certain Highland regions, and in which women secured just one of the 109 seats in National Parliament. Sarah, who is from the Highlands province of Chimbu, contested the national elections in 2002. Like other female candidates she was extremely frustrated by the process. According to Sarah, violence, intimidation, the proliferation of weapons and the use of bribery made it impossible for female candidates to compete in the Highlands. In advance of the 2007 elections, Sarah has teamed up with a number of other Highlands women's rights activists and intends to hold a three day gathering

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of women's leaders to discuss a nationwide strategy to assist women in the elections. The group hopes to raise awareness about the problems that women in Papua New Guinea face, the importance of equitable representation for women in government and the particular challenges that women face in contesting elections. One of objectives of the group is to secure greater protection for women candidates from the Electoral Commission. Sarah is a busy woman who wears many hats. When Amnesty International met with Sarah, for example, she was at the Village Courts Secretariat where, at the time, she was designing a human rights training and awareness program for the village courts.